

Mexico: Helitac Training

by Rocky Bernal

From 12-01-02 thru 12-12-02 I participated as one of two United States instructors on a training/advisor assignment to Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico, on behalf of the USAID Mission in Mexico and the US Forest Service's International Program. The team was composed of two US Forest Service personnel (one instructor and one logistical support) and one instructor from the Bureau of Land Management. This was the team's fourth assignment to Mexico. The purpose of the assignment was to instruct personnel from SEMARNAT (Secretariat for the Environment and Natural Resources) and the newly created CONAFOR (National Forestry Commission) in S-217, Interagency Helicopter Training Guide, and S-371, Helibase Manager. I was responsible for presenting Cargo Transport from S-217 and three units from S-371 (Operations and Organizations of the Helibase and Helispots), (Responsibilities, Procedures and Common Duties), and (Planning). The normal working day while on assignment is usually 10 to 12 hours per day. No overtime is involved. If an instructor is not presenting a unit, then time is spent preparing for the instructor's next presentation or assisting other instructors in the classroom. Another duty of the instructor is to review the training material for errors or look for ways to improve it. Mexico provided five instructors to assist in the helicopter operations training. Roberto Martinez, Eduardo Cruz, Francisco Rivera, Pedro Martinez, and Juan Moreno participated as instructors for Mexico. A United States instructor is always present in the classroom to provide assistance to his counterpart, to clarify points and answer questions. In addition to providing instructors, Mexico also provided three people to assist with logistical support. A total of 17 students received the training.



The training for the helicopter operations courses was held at SEMARNAT's national research and training facility in Cuernavaca. Classrooms, a cafeteria and lodging were provided by IMTA or El Instituto Mexicano de Tecnologia del Agua (Mexico's Institute of Water Technology). It is an interesting place. The facility is immaculate in its appearance and in its landscaping. The rooms are simple but clean. Two to three people may occupy a room. The food is simple but delicious. People, from all over Latin America, are there attending classes as students, instructors or researchers. I had an opportunity to visit with a lady professor from Brazil with a doctorate in hydrology.

With the establishment of CONAFOR, as Mexico's leading agency for firefighting, quite a few changes have taken place since my last assignment to Mexico. Oscar Cedeno is no longer involved with the fire program. He has taken a job in research. Sacramento Garcia Sosa is now in charge of the fire program for Mexico. Roberto Martinez is still involved with the training and education of firefighters. Alejo Barreto is no longer in charge of the aviation program. He has moved to another position. Alejo, in my opinion, was the driving force for the helicopter program as far as training, contracting and as an instructor. He will be missed. Isidro Garcia is not in charge of the helicopter program and has a lot of work to do.



Since May of 1998 when I first arrived in Chiapas to assist with helicopter operations, in support of Mexico's firefighting effort, I have seen an increased awareness in Mexico's firefighting personnel for improved helicopter operations with the emphasis being on safety and efficiency. The students that participate in S-217 and S-3371 are professionals with degrees in forestry, agronomy and engineering. The students have a varied amount of helicopter experience but they always demonstrate a

willingness to learn more about helicopter operations. They are very interested in improving the safety and efficiency of their operations. Student participation in classroom activities such as team exercises, asking questions, and general attitude are key to success. The majority of the students are usually older than, say American students attending the same classes. Although the presentation of S-217 and S-371 is given to them in compressed time, the students' grasp of the materials' concepts and ideas is very good. This evidenced by the participants' grades on the final exam.

It is my personal belief that whatever time, effort and money have been spent by both the United States and Mexico to provide this training has certainly been well worth it. This training has provided for an increase in Mexico's awareness for safe and efficient helicopter operations. CONAFOR is in the process of having helicopters on exclusive use contracts, a load calculation

form similar to the ones used in the United States in now in place to determine helicopter payload capability, and an aviation safety pocket book is available to assist field personnel. If anything, this training has in a small way contributed to improving relations between the two countries. As always Roberto Martinez and his staff are very gracious hosts and always go out of their way to make sure that United States instructors are comfortable.

I would like to close my report



Closing Ceremony

The gentleman second from the left is Sacramento Garcia Sosa, who is in charge of fire fighting for CONAFOR.

by acknowledging the assistance of Tom Frey and Connie Lewis from the Bureau of Land Management International Program, of the BLM's National Office of Fire & Aviation in Boise, Idaho for their time and effort spent coordinating with the different agencies involved to make sure that I have the required documentation to travel abroad, country clearance has been approved and that reimbursable accounts between the Forest Service and the BLM have been established to cover expenses. Without their assistance and encouragement my participation in this training program would not be possible.

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